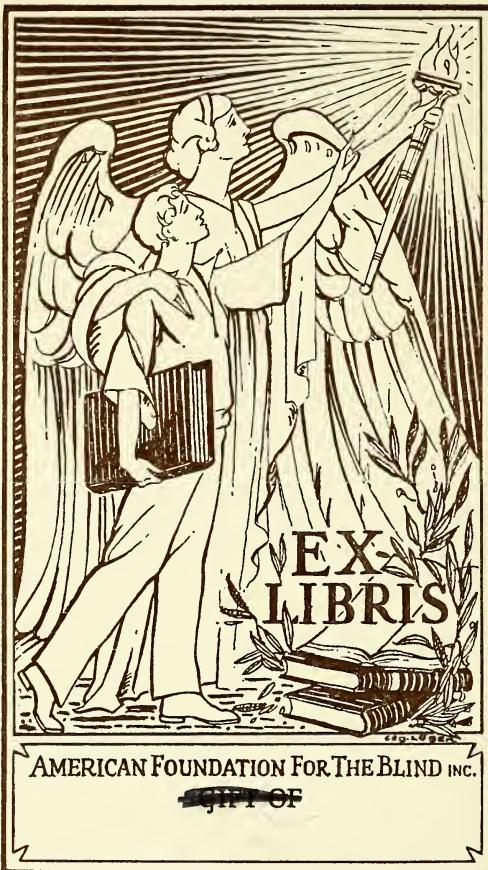


VAN CLEVE, Edward M.

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THE PREVENTION OF BLINDNESS

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# The Social Aspect of the Movement for the Prevention of Blindness: A History

Edward M. Van Cleve

Principal of the New York Institute for the  
Education of the Blind

The National Society for the  
Prevention of Blindness, Inc.

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# The Social Aspect of the Movement for the Prevention of Blindness: A History\* †

Edward M. Van Cleve

THE organized effort to conserve vision has attracted not only physicians and social workers, but teachers, editors, business men, labor leaders, engineers, and people in virtually every other walk of life

ON THE six occasions of the bestowal of the Leslie Dana Medal, it has been awarded heretofore in every case save one, to an eminent physician, and with acknowledged propriety. The subjects of the addresses made by these recipients have had a distinctly technical character, I doubt not. Therefore, it seemed best on this occasion to choose for our consideration a theme quite remote from the professional for the sake of variety on the one hand, and because of the incapacity of the speaker, on the other hand, to deal properly with technological aspects of our common interest. I call your attention then to the social aspect of the movement for the prevention of blindness.

And because the word "social" connotes people, this address will occupy itself with some personalities rather than with the progress of our movement in general. We have a phrase, social service, whose sense has acquired something of triteness through too frequent application, and for that reason I am somewhat loath to apply it to this work in which we are engaged. Yet in the best use of this lately invented term, the prevention of blindness ranks high as social service, for it is a Cause (written with a capital C) serving the people in a remarkably extended even if restricted sense. Every state in our Union has some vital connection with

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our National Society for the Prevention of Blindness, and more than 30 foreign countries as well. And the chief character in any historical review of the movement must always be recognized to be that long-time servitor of society, Louisa Lee Schuyler. Her social service began when as a young woman, emerging from her teens, she became a forerunner of the Red Cross through her active participation in the work of the United States Sanitary Commission near the close of the Civil War. Then came the founding of New York State Charities Aid Association and the establishment of the Bellevue Hospital School for Nurses. That she later became interested in preventing needless blindness was a stroke of fortune to us of which I shall speak later.

It is not my purpose to attempt at this time a detailed historical sketch of this movement; that indomitable and energetic collaborator of ours, Dr. Park Lewis, has urged me again and again to write the story of its beginnings and progress, since *quorum pars magna fui* (I think I may use such words in the same fashion as did Aeneas and with as little intentional egotism); I wish to speak of the people who had part in those beginnings, yet in dealing with these persons whom I shall delight to name and characterize in brief, I shall use that best method of knowing history—consideration of the men and women who have made the cause of prevention of blindness known and effective in these twenty-five years or so of its progress. Here I must be pardoned for some account of personal experiences quite unavoidable; so greatly has the movement developed from the time of those early efforts which are to be here recalled that one might be excused for indulging in reminiscences as of events long past; perhaps in another quarter century, as a really old man, I may tell the St. Louis workers in that day some stories of the times of their fathers, if the chance is given me.

All social developments have, I believe, begun in the concept and the devotion of some person. A single illustration will suffice: Adoniram Judson is preeminently typical of the 19th century exponent of missionary enterprise. Zeal for a cause, however, needed a sort of collateral to bolster its strength and to give it currency in the market. The story of his life shows how he obtained that needed social and political support. With Judson, as with many another, the missionary spirit must enlist co-operation of those not

initially interested, and many a wise missionary has developed statesmanship of a marked and lofty character. The ability to enlist able and powerful lieutenants in any cause is indispensable to its success. I am accustomed to think of Dr. Lucien Howe as a missionary in the field of medical enlightenment. In the '90's he secured legal enactments, first in New York State and then through arousing his fellow ophthalmologists, in other states, providing for the use of prophylaxis at the birth of babies. And these laws were mostly dead letters. When in 1908 I learned of the existence of such a law on the statute books of Ohio, put there in 1892 under the inspiration of the Howe Law of New York, I was told by certain ophthalmologists that it never had been taken seriously by the profession, that it was not meant to be enforced, that its purpose was merely educational. Being only a layman, an administrator, accustomed all my life first to obey the law and then to put some laws into effect, I was struck with the fact that this was something worse than futile, and a condition to be remedied. That was in Ohio and already in Massachusetts had begun that social service movement which was the forerunner of others, the establishment through the activities of a company of workers in the interests of the sightless of a State Commission for the Blind. Those Yankees had set themselves a four-limbed task, one of whose arms was prevention of blindness. Their cue was taken by the group of Ohioans who saw the chance to do service in such a field and who copied in large part the Massachusetts law, making prevention of blindness one of their chief aims. Thus the chairman of the Ohio Commission found himself face to face with that rather futile attitude of the medical profession toward the ophthalmia neonatorum law on the Ohio statute books, but empowered with his fellow commissioners to *secure* prevention of blindness.

Howe and his successors, notably Park Lewis, needed lay support. They secured it through the State Commissions, and of the New York Commission Dr. Lewis was a most active member. To the commanding influence of this statesman among physicians, this many-sided scholar in the school of humanity, this publicist of his profession, we owe the awakening of the interest of Louisa Lee Schuyler.

One day there came in the mail to Miss Schuyler's Madison

Avenue apartment a rather bulky piece of printed matter. It was the volume issued by the State of New York embodying the report of the Commission of 1906 to Investigate the Condition of the Blind in the State of New York. The compilation of this notable book was chiefly the work of the Commission's secretary, that well known laborer in the field of helpfulness to the blind, Olin H. Burritt, then superintendent of the state school at Batavia, the chairman and chief inspiration of the Commission being Dr. Lewis. Most people would put aside or wholly disregard such a report with its voluminous statistics, the usual long-winded remarks, its comments and recommendations; but not so this devoted public-spirited woman. She opened the volume and by chance saw first a picture of a group of blind children entitled, "Five Victims of Ophthalmia Neonatorum," and below the title she read: "Proper care at the proper time would have saved their sight." She says she was thunderstruck. She had never known anything much about the blind; with the fact that the calamity of blindness occurred to people, she was acquainted, of course, but that it might have been prevented in many cases, and was not, filled her soul with horror. Immediately she wrote to Dr. Lewis at Buffalo to ask him to call on her when he was next in New York City that she might consult with him concerning means to correct so unbelievable a situation. Dr. Lewis at once telegraphed that he would take the train and call upon Miss Schuyler the following day. The interview was held. The question put, "Is it true that children are going blind needlessly?" When the distinguished physician assured her that it was sadly enough true, there broke from her lips a vehement, "It MUST not be!" With characteristic energy Miss Schuyler proceeded to call together at luncheon a group of interested persons: Dr. Lewis, Miss Holt, Mr. John M. Glenn, Dr. J. Clifton Edgar, the noted gynecologist, and then and there was begun the drive against needless blindness. When she asked these advisers how much it would cost to get started and was told that \$3,000 a year might be necessary, she exclaimed, "We shall have it—we shall have more; let us have \$5,000."

The Russell Sage Foundation had begun its operations in 1907 and Miss Schuyler was one of its trustees. With the approval of

all the trustees and the director an appropriation of \$5,000 a year was made to inaugurate a campaign to accomplish prevention of such blindness as might be prevented. That brilliant woman, notable opportunist in the best sense of the word, Miss Winifred Holt, seized the occasion to join forces with Miss Schuyler and use the lately established New York Association for the Blind's Committee on Prevention of Blindness to set the movement before her public. What a way she had, Miss Holt, to command attention and inspire assistance! How she turned the half-convinced women and men of wealth and influence, keenly desirous of doing good, into contributors to her cause and then into whole-hearted supporters! A real cause of justified pride she has esteemed it that the Committee of her Association on Prevention of Blindness has done so much for this movement. To carry on money was needed and Miss Schuyler was quite able to secure the appropriation of money she had promised and the warm support of her fellow trustees of the Russell Sage Foundation as well as the intelligent interest and wise guidance of the Foundation's director, John M. Glenn.

Those years from 1905 to 1910 were a time of awakening in our movement. Down in Kentucky a devoted woman whose interest in the mountaineers had called her into a peculiarly intimate relationship with doctors and teachers as she tried through her Mountain Fund to help these needy people, Miss Linda Neville, had established her own Kentucky Society for Preventing Blindness and had joined with her fellow townsman, Dr. J. A. Stucky, of Lexington in organizing, managing, conducting eye clinics up the creek valleys to the remote settlements and persuading those who must have hospital care to come to the Lexington Hospital for treatment. In every roster of workers for prevention of blindness the names of that great hearted physician and his undaunted coadjutor must stand high.

In Massachusetts Edward E. Allen, lifelong laborer in the field of service to the blind and Annette P. Rogers, cultured sightless woman, were members of the Commission for the Blind, the first publicly appointed group to begin this work; its chairman was a man who gave largely of his fine business ability to its affairs and was deeply concerned along with his fellow commissioners over the

cause of preventing blindness; James P. Munroe was the philanthropist and business man, the scholar and administrator, servant of his own state, in war-time and after a chief-of-bureau in the federal government, a wise friend of our cause.

Maryland had a society for prevention of blindness, chiefly the expression of Dr. Hiram Woods' desire to gain the support of the people of Baltimore in staying the ravages of infantile blindness. Dr. Woods, genial, happy-spirited, friendly, beloved! A distinguished ophthalmologist, a man of great influence.

I wish I had in hand the letter received back in 1909, written in Miss Schuyler's old-fashioned script, asking if the time were not ripe for a national conference and a possible organization of the forces. We in Ohio had groped our way toward a process of promulgating our gospel—the good news that blindness is not necessarily nor usually an act of God. We had called on others for advice and suggestion and the New York State Committee, whose executive, Miss Carolyn Conant Van Blarcom, brilliant, capable, resourceful, had with a basis of nursing knowledge undertaken the making of a layman's first-aid kit of information, was the chief source of supply and inspiration. My judgment, and that of others approached on the subject, was favorable to an assembly of interested workers. They came together—those named above and a considerable number more—with the Russell Sage Foundation Committee as convener. A *News Letter* was published shortly after by the Committee of the Foundation to which we all contributed a report of the work in our several communities. Then another conference was held, December 17, 1910, more largely attended, and out of it came the plan for a national society. Munroe, Woods and I were the committee to formulate a tentative scheme and after a brief delay for whipping an organization into shape, the American Association for the Conservation of Vision was established March 23, 1911, with a board of directors and a staff to begin work. This board numbered ten, including the three above named with Dr. Lewis president, with also an engineer, an expert in lighting and a labor leader. As a member of this board, too, Dr. Jacob A. Shawan, superintendent of the public schools of Columbus, Ohio, a nationally known educator, was chosen. Staunch, stalwart, great-souled friend of our cause—he was able to do for

it less than he proposed because of family and personal illness; but he should never be forgotten as one of the early props of a staggering structure. For the brilliant beginning of the American Association for the Conservation of Vision was soon seen to be fading as the mirage of promised financial support failed to become actual. But the spring of 1911 gave opportunity to make a great start in the field of publicity and the Association's staff prepared under high pressure an admirable contribution to a great meeting held in the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City. But the bills for this came to a treasurer who had no funds and there was a debt which hung over us for some time. One remembers the worries of those days and the gropings for a way out with some regret that we had so little prescience and perhaps too much willingness to nurse the counsels of hope. Some of the board of directors asked to withdraw but they would not do so without honorably proposing to liquidate the indebtedness. And it was done, the group of us pooling our obligations and sharing in the payment—Dr. Lewis, who insisted on taking two shares of the indebtedness, Dr. Shawan and I stayed on, the others retiring; we three hoped we could find money with which to re-engage a secretary and push on.

But why renew too particularly the agonies of these years of hope and disappointment? It was a struggle to get the infant through those beginnings. One incident of hopeful nature relieved a constant gloom. I wrote personal letters of appeal to friends, explaining the need of such a movement and the hopefulness of success of such an organization as ours. Only a few small checks came as a response at first; one day, Mrs. Ella St. Clair, a woman of means, herself a shut-in, good friend of years before in our Greenville, Ohio, home, sent in a check for \$200 with the intimation that so long as I was actively engaged in the work she would make an annual contribution. Here was light in darkness! That money did something more than furnish and breed a little additional resource—it gave hope and encouragement to go on.

Another incident that belongs to this story of beginnings: Our triumvirate of never-say-dies assembled in Buffalo on occasion of a great educational meeting there and had the pleasure of meeting at luncheon, at his suggestion, Mr. Jerome D. Greene, executive director of the Rockefeller Foundation. It was a good luncheon, I

presume, set before us at Dr. Lewis's Club. I was too excited to know what I was eating. For, after we had concluded the gustatory part of our assembling, it was our privilege and purpose to set before this representative of generous contributing to worthy causes, Mr. Greene, our claim to recognition as a group of earnest workers in the field of public health, the field which the Rockefeller Foundation had chosen for its service. It was an enthusiastic and almost an agonized appeal that went into his ears. It turned out to be not unfruitful, though for some months it seemed otherwise.

It was good fortune that a young man of great force and character, Mr. Raynal C. Bolling, legal representative of the United States Steel Corporation and member of its Committee on Prevention of Injury by Accident, had been added to our board of directors. He saw the worth-whileness of such an organization as ours and he was able through his associations to make the cause appear a worthy one. In him Mr. Greene had confidence and both Mr. Bolling and Mr. Glenn of the Russell Sage Foundation had given the Association virility through their approval and their personal adherence. Imagine the joy which came with the announcement in May, 1914, that the Rockefeller Foundation had appropriated \$25,000, distributed over five years, for the carrying on of this work! The gift was conditioned on a budget of \$15,000 a year being provided. This was assured for the first year by the generous contribution of \$5,000 by the Russell Sage Foundation additional to the \$5,000 made for some years to the New York State Committee and to be continued to a merger of that Committee and the American Association for the Conservation of Vision.

So the National Committee for the Prevention of Blindness was born, that high sounding but less appealing "Conservation of Vision" title being dropped, and on January 1, 1915, began its career. I wish I were able to pay proper tribute to one of the chief sponsors of its beginning, John M. Glenn, faithfulest friend, wisest counsellor, unfailing optimist. Were it not for his persistence in hope and the encouragement of his manner and words the Society, now one of the most staunchly established and generously supported national organizations, would have been long delayed in its beginning and might, indeed, have failed of birth. And what a happiness to have known and associated with Major Raynal C.

Bolling, first great sacrifice of our aviation staff in the World War, man of character and high breeding, swift in decision, commanding in presence and in speech, a Chevalier de Bayard.

Elsewhere than in Massachusetts, pioneer of the movement, in Ohio, Kentucky, Maryland and New York, interest had sprung up spontaneously, or, perhaps, induced by reports of some of the activities above reviewed; this interest was especially notable in St. Louis where in 1911 the work of the Missouri Association for the Blind, now the St. Louis Society for the Blind began. The genius and the personality of Miss Carol Bates, in her effective inauguration of this service to the blind, was recognized and is remembered not only here in St. Louis but as far away at least as New York. With the generous support of Col. Butler and the co-operation of others her work of social helpfulness bore fruit in various ways. Like other similar organizations the St. Louis Society chose to lend its aid to preventing blindness and that phase of its service continues as one of great importance. The first board of directors included some whom I came to know well, the Greens, Dr. John Jr., whose name mentioned in ophthalmological circles as friend to our cause always commanded a hearing for us, and S. M. Green, the representative in St. Louis known throughout the United States for every good thing that concerns the blind or cognate interests, Dr. Thomas J. Riley, who recently died in Brooklyn after an all-too-short life of brilliant service to humanity both here and in the metropolis, widely known and respected in his special field, Mr. James C. Jones, whose appreciated interest in matters concerning the sightless led us who were officially concerned to look his way when the American Foundation for the Blind was established with the hope that he might join its first official group, and with them besides Miss Bates, Mrs. Curtis, Mrs. Pelton, Miss Sloan, Dr. Lock and Mr. Knox. While this Society's aims were first to give employment to the blind and promote their social welfare a third aim of no less prominence was set forth —to prevent blindness. Into this work, with a heart of gold and a geniality that has made her beloved in all circles where she moved came Mrs. Anna F. Harris. The sixteen years she gave to this work made her not only a well known figure in this city but gave her a place of importance in national gatherings. And

I doubt not that the generous and intelligent service rendered by this St. Louis Society throughout the twenty years since 1911 continues with the approving support of Mr. Jones, now the honorary president, and with the direction of Mr. Johnston, the new active president, and his associates, Messrs. Carter, Dana, Lang, McBride, Barnes, Cummings, Hardesty and Green, and the management of Mrs. Lyle and her assistants. In this city, this Society under whose auspices we meet tonight, is a recognized power for good with its sevenfold program of usefulness.

In far away Utah and then in San Francisco a woman of generous impulses had similarly set up societies for promoting the cause of prevention of blindness and helping those who had become blind. This was Mrs. Andrew S. Rowan. She had married the man who carried the message to Garcia, young Lieutenant Rowan, and as an officer's wife she had gone to the Philippines and to Salt Lake City and then in his retirement to San Francisco. Here she and Col. Rowan now reside. Her enthusiasm drew to the cause adherence of society women and professional men and interest of great value was aroused in the cause of prevention.

And so, not only in the east, the center, the far west, in New Orleans, in Chicago, in the northwest, there were women and men who were stirred with that sense of a desire to help humanity out of which has grown this great cause of ours.

Let us now go back to that reference I made to the statement of some Ohio physicians concerning the Ophthalmia Neonatorum Law of 1892, to the effect that no hope of its enforcement was ever entertained. They may have felt their pessimism justified by experience of previous efforts in legislation for social betterment, yet it is a fine evidence of the hopefulness of the doctors who secured the enactment of the law when they offered it as an educational measure. To educate whom? one may ask. The rank and file of the medical profession, in fact. One day a group of eminent Ohio oculists met in my office by invitation and were requested to offer us suggestions as to how best we might promote the elimination of babies' sore eyes. An answer came swiftly and with some very strong expletives to the effect that we might begin with the medical schools. As, in the illustration used, Judson the missionary with all the will in the world and all the

backing of his own profession could not effect his great service without co-operative interest on the part of others indifferent or ignorant as to his main purpose, so these ophthalmologists needed some means other than any they had yet tried to secure the end they had in view, the reduction of infantile ophthalmia. One admires these physicians the better he knows them, earnestly striving to prevent at the very source the making of patients. What was suggested, that education begin with the medical schools, of course was out of the sphere of mere laymen, but it is interesting to relate that now, less than a quarter of a century later, the routine use of prophylaxis in hospitals is the rule whereas then it was, so we were told, the exception. What brought about the attention given in medical schools and everywhere may have been, as I think it was, the combined influence of these specialists and the laymen who had found it their task and their satisfaction to noise abroad the facts that should impress profession and public, too. It is interesting to recall how sometimes the propaganda bore evidence of success. One day in a plumbing salesroom in Columbus, Ohio, I was buying a valve attachment or something and ordered it sent to the School for the Blind. The salesman, learning that I was connected with blindness, said: "Say, did you ever hear about babies going blind because they didn't use drops when they were born? I saw an article in the paper about it, and, you bet, I made the doctor use 'em in *my* baby's eyes when he was born last week." The author of the newspaper publicity was pleased to note its effectiveness, though he refrained from announcing his responsibility for the article. But that the law itself was a dead letter and, indeed, incapable of enforcement remained the opinion of many, even as distinguished a partisan as Dr. Bruner of Cleveland. He told me that a certain legal adviser had assured him that the law had so many holes in it that it was not worth while to shoot any in. It remained for a certain Cleveland woman to prove the gentlemen incorrect in their judgment, for Marion Campbell, dogged and persevering, unwilling to leave any stone unturned in the effort to carry out her purpose of making it dangerous to neglect babies' eyes, brought case after case to trial with conviction of the careless attendant, under this very same law, intended only as educational and reputedly as full of holes as a Swiss cheese. To this devoted woman,

Miss Campbell, Ohio, New York, Illinois all owe a debt of respect and appreciation for faithful and effective service in prevention of blindness.

Perhaps it has been made clear in these remarks, partly historical and reminiscential, partly a portrayal of contributory personalities to the accomplishment of a set purpose—to make known the facts and stir the intent to overcome the needless waste of blindness that can be prevented—that this movement, at first essentially a medical men's movement, has become the more successful because into professionalism has been inducted the social element. A cause becomes a reform and grows to the status of a commonplace mode of living when the professional proponents are joined by those outside the immediate circle who give their interest and effort to promulgate the facts and thus gain the hearing and the acceptance of all intelligent people. In this process we see enlisted the interest of a great educator, a David Starr Jordan, who gave his adherence to this cause in its early stages; a noted public man, a William Howard Taft who gave his name as honorary president to the National Society; a successful business man, a Leslie Dana who conceives the cause sufficiently important to induce him to provide for the medal whose annual bestowal calls attention to the work done through certain public acclaim; an editor and publicist, a John H. Finley, of the *New York Times*, whose words spoken and written have accentuated the importance of the movement again and again; a distinguished and world famous minister, a Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, who can find no field of humanitarian effort more worthy of his sympathy; a lawyer and diplomat, a Joseph H. Choate, whose deep humanitarianism led him to make common cause with us. A catalogue of names of the good and great might be in this connection lengthened to tediousness. Suffice it to say that in every walk of life the men and women who have thought well of this cause are legion, the distinguished and the less widely known, and the great common people. It is when the sympathy and interest of society in general are aroused that a movement such as is ours may be said to have reached its apotheosis.

And it is in a spirit of true gratitude and satisfaction that the national prevention of blindness movement, now almost seventeen

years old as a going concern and nearly twenty-five years old as a joint physicians' and laymen's enterprise, has claimed the approval of many men distinguished in the profession of ophthalmology, such men as Drs. Glaser of San Francisco; Würdemann of Seattle; Luedde, the Post brothers and Howard of St. Louis (besides Dr. John Green already named); Bruns of New Orleans; Jackson of Denver; Wilder and Brown of Chicago; de Schweinitz, Holloway and Posey of Philadelphia; Blair of Pittsburgh; Gifford of Omaha; Stucky of Lexington; Wilmer of Baltimore; Derby of Boston; Bruner of Cleveland; and Alger, Berens, Cutler of New York;—to mention only a few and these all men whose affiliations with our enterprise came in the days of my managing directorship. Since my retirement from the chief responsibility, a host of others, particularly younger men, have given their countenance and active support to it. I believe I am justified in saying that the ophthalmological profession generally has endorsed the work of the National Society both individually and collectively.

Born in an effort to enforce the saving of babies from needless blindness, this movement has become broader in scope and more comprehensive in plan as the years have gone by. It is remarkable what sorts of people have become interested in its work and worth. An analysis of the list of 25,000 financial supporters of the National Society will show people in every walk of life giving this sort of allegiance to the cause. And it is because the social appeal of help to humanity is heard more distinctly and in more widely distributed regions that we dare hope it is to become a universally recognized cause.

Men of business, women of social prestige, professional leaders of human kind, engineers and manufacturers, teachers and preachers, writers and editors, artists and leaders of labor, presidents of colleges and universities and leaders in public life—presidents, senators, governors—in short, men and women of light and leading everywhere have made common cause with physicians and social workers in an ever-increasing development of this movement which we here celebrate. Says the editor of a great metropolitan daily: "The survey of the various aspects of this modern 'holy war' should open the eyes of the many who can see, giving them a view of one of the most beneficial and nobly

humanitarian undertakings which have ever actuated a group of human beings."

To have had any part in such a meritorious service rightly warms the heart and stirs a pardonable pride. Let us as intelligent and generous members of human society give to such an undertaking always our best thought and our warmest support.



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